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ABSTRACT

A semester-long study examined the needs and goals of adult students. Subjects, 22 adults over the age of 25 years, were selected to represent, as much as possible, a cross section of the older students likely to be found in freshman English courses at a large but not highly selective university. Data included questionnaires completed by the students, written self-analyses completed by the students at the end of the course, classroom observation, and interviews with instructors. Results indicated that: (1) the initial stage of the academic endeavor was the most difficult; (2) students' reasons for entering or returning to college were serious ones; (3) subjects expressed a high degree of confidence about their return to formal schooling; (4) descriptions provided by the instructors were somewhat less positive than those given by the students themselves; (5) writing did not hold a very important place in their lives; and (6) the subjects expressed positive attitudes towards what a composition course had to offer. Findings suggest that, in general, the subjects were unrealistic about their own situations, about what college could do for them, and about what a writing class would ask of them. Composition instructors can enhance the older student's chances for success by: not destroying the enthusiasm and resolve that play a large part in older students' views of attending college; using collaborative learning, peer editing, and reading response groups; introducing students to a variety of writing tasks; and addressing the issue of what constitutes good writing. (Seven figures of data are attached.) (RS)

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BACK TO SCHOOL: ADULTS IN THE FRESHMAN WRITING CLASS

Every ten years or so, filmmakers seem to discover what college teachers have known for some time now: that older students, intent on developing personal interests or charting new careers, enter college with an agenda different from that of the usual eighteen-year-old freshman. Several decades ago, Loretta Young donned the then-mandatory beanie in Mother Was a Freshman. Some years later Julie Walters discovered Shakespeare, and Michael Caine, in Educating Rita. Even Rodney Dangerfield delighted his fans when he went Back to School, on film, a couple of summers ago. In the movie version, the mixture of youth and age, innocence and experience, usually results in comedy based on generational differences and dislocations.

The real thing, however, even with its own moments of irony and humor, is generally a more serious affair. Those of us who find older students seated in our classrooms alongside the recent high school graduates cannot help but wonder about their needs and goals. What do students over the age of twenty-five want and expect and need when they come to college for the first time, or when they begin again--at the beginning?

Looking for answers, I discovered that most of what we know about this group of students is anecdotal, a compilation of general impressions and good stories accumulated over the years. I could find little firm data about the writing interests and experiences they

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bring to our classes. What do we know about their attitudes towards school or towards the act of writing? How do they feel about their chances for success? What do they expect from the instructor? Why have they enrolled in the university? In Patricia Connors' 1982 study comparing the attitudes of older students and traditional freshmen, she concludes that "composition teachers must be ready to adapt their courses to meet the needs of the returning or older students who comprise an increasingly larger percentage of our composition courses" (266), and major publishing houses are currently exploring the market for freshman texts tailored to the interests of older freshmen. But how are we to alter our courses and textbooks to meet their needs and interests until we know them better?

To answer some of the questions I had about older students, I carried out a semester-long study that began with twenty-eight adult students (over twenty-five years of age) and ended with twenty-two, six dropping out of the course or the university during the semester. Of those who finished the term, half were entering the university as first-time freshmen, the rest returning to college after an absence of five or more years. (Two had graduated from high school ten years before, and one eleven years earlier. Both were in college for the first time.) As an average, they had not been in a formal academic situation for almost nine years. They were men and women with scores in the low, middle, and high range of the English portion of the ACT who were registered for developmental English, freshman composition, and an introductory honors course. Almost half of them were responsible for managing a household with children, and a third of them held jobs, five of them working between 20-40 hours per week. In short, they were selected to represent, as much as possible, a cross

section of the older students likely to be found in freshman English courses at a large but not highly selective university.

I sought information about the older students in a variety of ways at different times in the semester. Much of what I learned came from four questionnaires filled out by the students and the written self-analyses I asked them to provide at the end of the course. In addition, I discovered some information on my own by observing their classes, and instructors provided their point of view in personal interviews with me.

The inescapable conclusion I reached was that the initial stage of the academic endeavor is the most difficult one for these students. It is probably the stage most critical to their success. The opening weeks of a semester present them with personal, organizational, and academic problems that can lead to their growth or to their failure. This discussion is a look at what they are thinking and feeling at that period; it is also a consideration of what the composition instructor can do to help make their grand adventure a success.

Before seeking information about the writing experiences and attitudes of older students, I attempted to find out something about their academic expectations. The answers to a questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the term verified my supposition that their reasons for entering or returning to college were serious ones. Admiring people who had college degrees, almost all of these students planned to attend long enough to earn one for themselves. When asked why they had decided to enroll, they cited the desire to pursue specific intellectual interests, to acquire skills leading to employment, and to come to know themselves better. They rejected the

idea that they were attending college to try something new, to have something to do, to find out what to do with their lives, or simply to have fun. Virginia's comment was typical of the group. She said: "I consider myself to be ambitious. I've wanted to attend college for a long time, and now that I'm here, I hope to make good grades." Most of them wanted to make A's and B's; only four felt they would be satisfied with mostly C's. All expected to work hard.

Going back to school was not without its problems for this group of students. Although all but two said they were taking up their studies with the approval and encouragement of family and friends, 64% of them admitted that going to college was a financial strain and that it required social, family or other sacrifices.

Despite the problems, the adult students expressed a high degree of confidence about their return to formal schooling. As Patrick put it: "Coming back to college is right for me now. I didn't do very well when I was here before, but I was too young then to know what I wanted--except for a good time." Like Patrick, most of the older students had firm reasons for their positive expectations, explaining that they had become more knowledgeable, organized, and motivated than when they were last in school. All felt that they had greater self understanding and more clearly defined goals now. As a result, they expected to enjoy being in school again. Although a fourth of the students were anxious about doing well in college courses, most did not consider themselves to be less capable of success than recent high school graduates or to lack study skills because of being out of school for a number of years.

An interesting discrepancy appears at this point, inviting additional research. That is, the descriptions of student attitudes

provided by instructors were somewhat less positive than those given by the students themselves. The teachers were more likely to characterize their older students as anxious and insecure, causing them to work harder, or overly confident, evident in their patronizing attitude towards both teacher and other students. Questions such as "How does the age of the instructor affect the attitude of the student?" and "How much posturing takes place because older students feel they are expected to exhibit confidence?" and "Are men more confident than women?" remain to be answered.

Turning from an examination of the general academic expectations of older freshmen to a more specific look at their writing histories and interests, I discovered, with some disappointment but not much surprise, that writing did not hold a very important place in their lives. (See Figure 1). Most of them admitted writing only when an occasion required it; even then, only thirteen claimed to be moderately dutiful about composing even thank-you notes. As Sylvia commented: "When I want to get in touch with family or friends who live out of town, I just pick up the phone." As a matter of fact, half of the group said that they seldom or almost never wrote instead of calling. Almost 78% said that they would rather talk to someone than write to them.

The idea of writing for oneself was not particularly popular either. Half stated that on their own they seldom or never did any composing, although three-quarters of them admitted that they wrote for themselves (in journals or diaries) at least twice a month. Few, only four, expressed strong interest in composing poems, short stories and plays, leaving the overwhelming majority to respond that they were rarely or only sometimes interested in doing so. Some of the students

seemed aware that writing could be used as a study technique, but hardly anyone considered it a pleasurable way to spend leisure time. Eighteen preferred television over writing, and seventeen preferred being with friends.

These responses become more interesting (see Figure 2) upon learning that more than half the students agreed that writing helps them find out what they think, and even more of them acknowledged that writing helps express their feelings. They seemed to be aware of what writing can do for them, but reluctant to take advantage of what it offers.

These somewhat disheartening answers are not surprising considering that the past experiences of these students have not made it necessary to do much writing. (See Figure 3.) Only one wrote for a school newspaper or yearbook in high school. Less than half had had occasional need to write in connection with volunteer work in the community. Only twelve said that they had ever composed letters to the newspaper or to political figures. The only area of their lives in which writing figured often was the management of their home or business, 86% of them noting that in this context they at least made lists or issued memos. Charles pointed out that he wrote checks.

To test my emerging notion that the attitude of these students towards writing could at best be described as one of indifference, I decided to ask more direct questions as to how they felt about it. (See Figure 4.) Did they like to write? Their responses formed a bell curve: one answered "almost always," four "often," eleven "sometimes," five "seldom," and one "almost never." On being pressed for more specific answers, only one admitted enjoying taking minutes at group meetings, and four to taking notes voluntarily at lectures and

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meetings outside of school.

Despite the limited experiences they reported having had with writing, they generally felt themselves to be adequate, if not superior writers. Again their responses formed a curve: one considered himself or herself almost always competent, one almost never, the rest falling bell-like between the two extremes. Part of the problem for the uncertain ones seemed to lie in their doubts about grammar. Five expressed being insecure about grammar almost always, two often, eleven at least sometimes. An even higher number expressed the feeling that they would benefit from studying grammar. Punctuation provided another source of insecurity, with seventeen feeling unsure about its use at least sometimes.

Like many students at the beginning of a semester, this group expressed positive attitudes towards what a composition course had to offer them and how they would perform in it. All expected, with varying degrees of intensity, to enjoy it. Only four confessed to taking it only or mostly because it was a requirement. Part of their affirmation stemmed no doubt from agreement with an opinion expressed by Lil, who wrote: "I think this course will help me to pass my other courses, and when I finish school it will help me get a job." However, only fifteen believed that writing skills are generally necessary for success. This minor contradiction may reflect their belief that a college degree confers vast advantages on a job-seeker and the recognition that passing Freshman English is a requirement for the degree. Their self-confidence also contributed to their positive expectations, as thirteen felt strongly certain of their chances for success in the course, and only seven were seriously anxious about taking it. All seemed to agree with Barbara, who wrote: "I'm really

looking forward to getting better at writing." Eighteen of them said they had enrolled in the course with strong anticipation.

Another reason they looked forward to the course may have been their belief that on their own they were not likely to improve their writing. (See Figure 6.) Only six admitted that they had attempted to do so. In general they held that people learn most about English at school, only four expressing the opinion that most language learning takes place in the home. They also recognized that a reader other than the self made them more careful writers. Although eight did not object to going back at a later date to re-read what they had written, half reported that when writing for someone else, they often or almost always revised what they had written.

Given the somewhat confusing information that the older students infrequently engaged in writing and were rarely enthusiastic about it, but considered themselves relatively competent writers who were looking forward to improving their skills, I began to wonder what they considered good writing to be. (See Figure 7.) I asked them, in a variety of ways. Although only six asserted that the mechanical aspects of writing (punctuation, spelling and such) to be more important than the subject matter and originality, in answer to other questions, the majority expressed the opinion that good writing conforms to clearly defined rules of usage and mechanics, that "correctness" is always important, that an educated person should be able to identify the parts of speech in a sentence, and that diagramming sentences is important in learning to write. On the other hand, a surprising seventeen agreed that deviation from standard English usage is sometimes effective.

The emerging profile was not a clear one. These twenty-two

older students who had enrolled with the serious intent of pursuing their education, who expressed confidence in knowing who they were and what they were about appeared in some ways to be just as naive as the average eighteen-year-old freshman, though the nature of their naivete was different. They were unrealistic about their own situations, about what college could do for them, and about what a writing class would ask of them.

For example, almost all hoped to earn a degree, but they were taking, on average, only ten hours of course work. Graduation is possible at that rate of study, but the frustration of almost doubling the number of semesters of enrollment promises to be debilitating, especially for students who are attending classes under financial strain and personal sacrifice. Their expressed commitment to work hard on their studies despite problems and responsibilities of jobs, family, and health is admirable, but it should not obscure the fact that the strongest resolve can weaken with time.

The rewards they expected a college education to bring were not completely realistic either. A degree does not automatically confer a profession, wealth, and social status, but most of the group was confident it would at least take them closer to those goals. On the other hand, several students found rewards that erred in the other direction by being too short term. Those who had long desired to attend college had a tendency to see their enrollment as an end, the fulfillment of a goal, instead of the beginning that it should be.

Their unexamined enthusiasm extended to their composition course. Despite the fact that they had heretofore exhibited little interest in or need for writing, and not much for reading, they expected to enjoy working to improve their literacy skills. Although

they seldom wrote for fun, learning, or communication, as they began the semester, they viewed themselves as competent, capable, hard-working individuals who would find pleasure and profit in a composition course. What they liked to do and what they expected to enjoy doing were not the same, but they failed to recognize the discrepancy.

They were at best short-sighted about why they were taking the course. Citing the desire to improve their writing skills so that they could do well in other courses and improve their chances of being employed, they indicated little use of writing to find out what they thought, express their feelings, solve problems, or analyze situations. They seemed to expect the instructor to help them clean up their grammar so that their writing would achieve a higher degree of correctness and they could move into better paying, more socially approved jobs. With the commas in all the right places, their lives would improve. Despite their resolutions to work hard, the responsibility was primarily that of the school and the instructor, who could give them the formulas for getting where they wanted to go.

Should an instructor be concerned about the contradictions between such idealistic views and life as it is? After all, a sense of optimism accompanies most students at the outset of a term, especially when they enter a new school or level of education.

The study suggests that the answer is yes: instructors should be especially concerned with the attitudes of older students in the early stages of their college experience because their naivete can have more serious consequences than that of their younger freshmen classmates. It is potentially more hurtful because it can jeopardize their success, and failure is more damaging to the lives of older

students. They have waited longer for the chance to attend college. Their jobs have impressed on them the need for a degree. They have made compromises and sacrifices to attend. Their role models have been more clearly defined. Thus they arrive with higher expectations, with a heavier investment in doing well. Failure means reevaluating fundamental self-concepts, mostly from a negative point of view.

What can composition instructors do to enhance adult students' chances of success? We can begin by not doing something. Once we are aware of typical attitudes, we can take care not to destroy the enthusiasm and resolve that plays such a large part in older students' views of attending college. When problems arise, that determination and desire can go far to carry them beyond discouragement and frustration. To state the point more positively and more specifically, we can make assignments that minimize risk early in the semester, assignments that can reassure the uncertain and reinforce the committed.

Modern pedagogical strategies are particularly helpful with older students. Collaborative learning, peer editing, and reading and response groups help to break down the invisible barriers between age groups and thereby increase the sense of acceptance felt by the non-traditional freshmen. They not only facilitate interaction among students, but they also improve relationships between teacher and students. Responsible and eager, adult students react well when instructors are more open and less authoritarian than expected. Adult freshmen are comfortable taking over when the instructor lets go the power traditionally associated with standing behind the lectern.

The teacher-student relationship is particularly important with older writing students because composition instructors are in a

strategic position to help them bring their optimism into line with reality by providing them with ways to find where and how the two intersect. If writing is a means of self-discovery, problem solving, and situation analysis, it is an appropriate tool for adult students to use in defining their purposes and their capabilities--i.e., themselves. In the first questionnaire of this study, the students indicated that they expected to draw subjects for their writing from their own experiences, and it is that material that can provide effective means of self-questioning. Although it is ultimately the student who does the digging and makes the discoveries, the instructor must set up situations and make assignments that offer students the opportunity to connect their academic and "real life" experiences. If the instructor provides topics for writing, for example, they should be designed to encourage reflective and critical thinking: for example, "Recount an occasion on which you had to make a serious decision. Explain your choice and why you made it, evaluating it in light of its consequences." Simple narrative may be the beginning, but finding causes, making comparisons, asking how experiences fit together are, in the long run, the acts that lead to meaning.

Writing teachers can also introduce older students to a variety of writing tasks, expanding their repertoire beyond lists and memos (and check writing), beyond even essay examinations and business letters. Instructors can demonstrate that writing is a way to spend leisure time, to study, to find out what one thinks and feels. We can set up situations in which older students find out for themselves that writing and speaking are different kinds of communication. They can be asked to engage in an analysis of those differences so that they can come to know what writing offers them. In journals and with other

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students they can discuss their writing problems and processes, making discoveries about their writing and about themselves.

Finally, at some point the issue of "what is good writing?" needs to be addressed. Older students, anxious to do the right thing, need to be pushed beyond surface correctness as the measure of what is good. Presumably their respect for "grammar," which seems to cover everything from punctuation to parsing, comes from years of teacher reinforcement. Now it is time, past time, that they learn that not all correct writing is good writing, and not all effective writing is correct. I do not advocate throwing away all conventions of standard usage, but considerations of audience, voice, and occasion, of which these older students seemed to be largely unaware at the beginning of the course, can vastly enlarge their definitions of what is good.

The value of the study and its conclusions, then, is not that it reveals radically new discoveries, but that it verifies what many of us have thought all along. The older students who come to college for the first time or return after a long absence enrich our classes by their commitment, background, and eagerness. Although their hopes sometimes outweigh their understanding of what college can do for them and why they are taking freshman composition, they are willing to encounter new ideas and test them in the light of past experience. They are able to formulate new conclusions, not always invalidating the old, but often expanding previously held convictions. In short, they are willing to grow, asking that we instructors show them the way to do so. We can begin by understanding who they are and what they are thinking and feeling when they enter our classrooms.

WORK CITED

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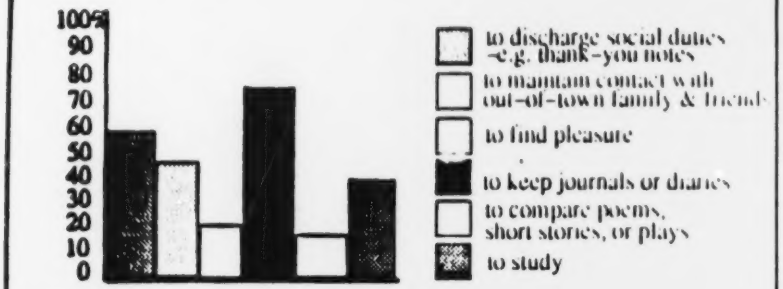
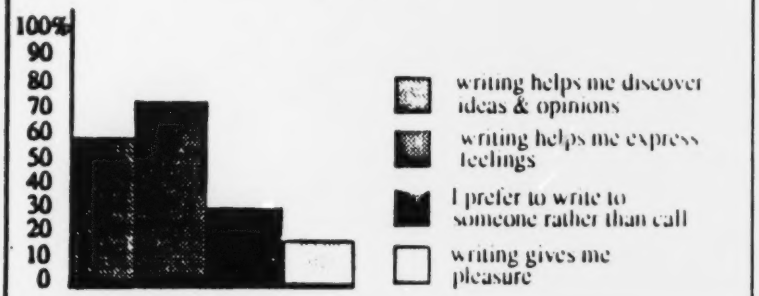
Uses of Writing

Figure # 1



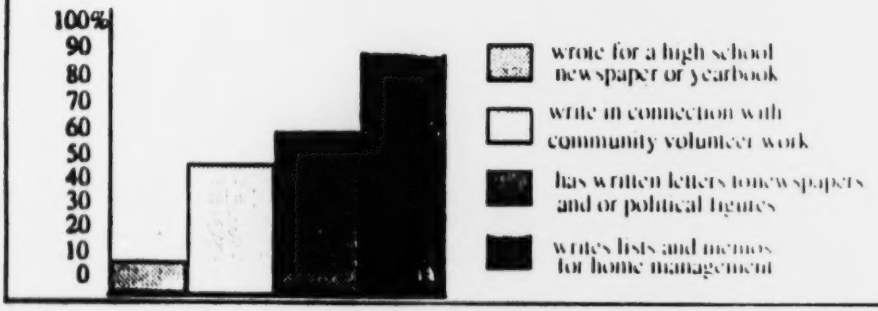
Attitudes Towards Writing

Figure # 2



Writing Histories

Figure # 3



Attitude Towards Writing

Figure # 4

almost always	4.5%	5%	5%	23%
often	1.8%	18%	18%	9%
sometimes	50%	45%	50%	50%
seldom	23%	23%	23%	14%
almost never	4.5%	9%	5%	5%

I like to write

I voluntarily take minutes at meetings or notes at non-school lectures

I consider myself a competent writer

I am insecure about grammar

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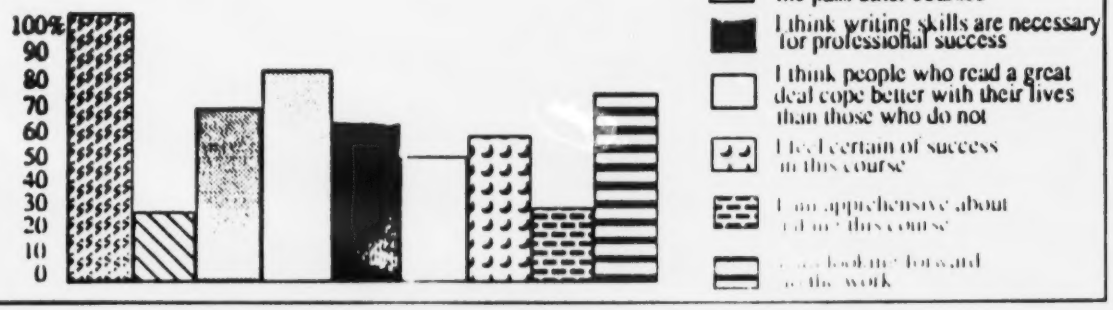
Attitudes Towards School

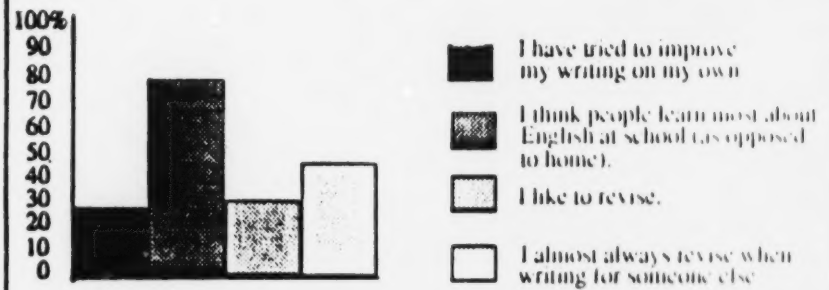
at the beginning of semester

Figure # 5


100%
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
I expected to enjoy the course
I took this course because it was a requirement
I think it will help me get a job
I think it will help me me pass other courses
I think writing skills are necessary for professional success
I think people who read a great deal cope better with their lives than those who do not
I feel certain of success in this course
I am apprehensive about taking this course
I am looking forward to this work

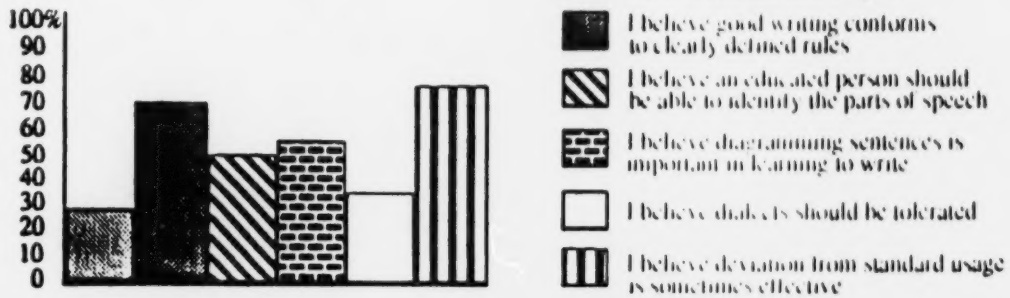
Concepts of Language Learning

Figure # 6



Concepts of "Good Writing"

Figure #7



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